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Leading the News: AIDS Researcher Ho, Others Begin to Tackle SARS

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SARS is the biggest news in the world of virology since AIDS, and some of the world's leading scientists are jumping into the pursuit of a weapon to fight it.

AIDS researcher David Ho, who runs the Aaron Diamond AIDS Research Center in New York and was a key driver of AIDS-treatment approaches now in use, said he has agreed to conduct work on potential therapy and vaccine approaches for SARS, or severe acute respiratory syndrome. While he stressed that most of those strategies would take years to bear fruit, he said he had ideas for "some therapeutics that could be developed over the short term," which he defined as "multimonth or multiweek."

Dr. Ho was invited by Hong Kong's government to help advise the city's researchers on scientific approaches to developing therapies and vaccines against SARS. He and at least two other high-level U.S. scientists spent the first part of this week in meetings with researchers.

"Given all the lessons we've learned from HIV," Dr. Ho said, "this one looks easier."

Dr. Ho has a longstanding collaboration with Hong Kong, which has been helping him set up a state-of-the-art laboratory for work on HIV vaccines. As a result of the discussions this week, that lab will now be used for work on SARS, at least for the short term.

He added that he wouldn't change the basic mission of his research institute away from AIDS. "But," he added, "when asked to help with a crisis situation, if you can, you do."

So far, there are more than 4,000 suspected SARS cases world-wide and more than 250 people have died. While that death toll is minuscule compared with other scourges, it has attracted attention because the disease is new, unknown and spreading. Countries are pouring resources into the search for a cure. At the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases in Bethesda, Md., two separate groups are now working on plans to develop a vaccine.

The germ believed to cause SARS, a new type of coronavirus, was identified with astounding speed, thanks to modern molecular-biology tools and unprecedented collaboration among scientists. Finding a cure is a tougher challenge. It took more than a decade of work by Dr. Ho and a legion of other scientists to develop treatments against the virus that causes AIDS. A vaccine still doesn't exist.

The timeline may prove much shorter with SARS, both because of advances in science and the relative simplicity of the suspected virus. The complete genetic makeup of the bug has already been mapped; although the blueprint is similar to other coronaviruses, the makeup of its genes are only about 60% similar. Investigating the functions of those genes will help lay the groundwork for efforts to design new drugs and vaccines.

Coronaviruses' usual victims are pigs, chickens and other animals. The two human forms of coronavirus known before SARS caused little more than a cold.

Ralph S. Baric, an expert on animal coronaviruses at the University of North Carolina, is one of dozens of researchers who have moved quickly to work on SARS. He obtained copies of the virus's genes, and is now trying to graft them inside laboratory bacteria, where they can be methodically manipulated and studied. A weakened virus, for example, might be useful as a vaccine.

Several other well-known virologists are also working on the SARS threat, including Peter Jahrling, of the U.S. Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases, who rose to prominence as a researcher in the field of deadly smallpox and Ebola viruses. He plans to initiate monkey tests as part of the institute's SARS research.

At the government's infectious-disease institute in Bethesda, Gary Nabel, head of the vaccine research center, says he is shifting 30 people from HIV and Ebola projects to launch research on a SARS vaccine.

A host of companies is considering entering the fray. Last week, representatives of GlaxoSmithKline PLC, Merck &Co., Johnson &Johnson and Wyeth and others met to discuss potential SARS vaccines with top U.S. government scientists, at a meeting in Washington led by Health and Human Services Secretary Tommy Thompson.

Aventis SA, a major producer of polio and influenza vaccines, is among several companies now ramping up to begin work on a SARS vaccine.

Gautam Naik in London contributed to this article.

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